

**Chapter 12:**  
**Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Grada**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(Just Outside The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)**

The sky looked like it had been painted with glitter. The smoke had cleared hours ago and the moons were smaller than they had been the night before; the only glow that had grown was the tiny pink moon above the far horizon. The stars had taken advantage of the lack of other lights and were sparkling so brightly it looked like they were dancing on the dark, iridescent blue behind them.

The only thing brighter than the stars were the hot flames that Coborn tended before she scooped a ladle of soup into a pair of ceramic bowls. The bowls were thick, marked with chunky wolverine cursive and cultural paintings, and Ka'harja felt their warmth seep into his hands as he took them from the young cook.

'Nice night,' he commented.

Coborn nodded nervously and mumbled something —too quiet for Ka'harja to hear — before turning back to the fire.

Clicking his tongue anxiously, Ka'harja looked across the caravan. Stars was sitting on her own away from the caravaners who sat around the fire. She kissed her baby's forehead and sighed as she glanced at her mother; who sat on the other side of the fire even further from the crowd. Ka'harja thought of going to comfort Stars while Dena wasn't able to, but he couldn't. He had no idea what to say.

*Sorry that you had to watch your father-brother get his throat ripped out,* Ka'harja thought sarcastically. *If it makes you feel any better, one of my mothers got her head bitten off.*

He shook his head. It was too awkward— *He* was too awkward. He'd just make things worse. And besides... he had to find Distro and make sure she was okay.

Ka'harja's eyes scanned over the caravan but he couldn't see her, so he stopped Trat as he passed and asked.

'Uh man, I don't know,' Trat shrugged, twitching an ear. 'I think I saw her walk off somewhere that way.'

'Thanks,' Ka'harja's response was flat; though he hadn't meant it to be. He'd barely heard the answer over his own worried thoughts and it took him a moment to process which direction Trat had pointed. He weaved through the camp and into the dark shadows cast by the caravans. He could scarcely make out the way down to the river; if it hadn't been for the moonlight shimmering on the water he would have missed the Distro-shaped silhouette that sat at its shore.

With a deep breath, Ka'harja forced a smile onto his face and made his way to her.

Distro flinched as he sat beside her. She turned her face away and shifted awkwardly, scratching at the scales that had grown over her freckles with an anxious energy. Ka'harja elbowed her hand away from her neck before holding out one of the bowls of soup, which he had figured he was lucky not to have spilt on his way down the hill.

Distro sighed as she took it, staring at it rather than eating it, and Ka'harja had to lean over and kiss her before she realised it was food.

She smiled at him with her uneven jaw and her new teeth clanked together as she tried to pull back her underbite into a more comfortable position. Her uncomfortable smile faded into a frown and she flicked her too-long ears in frustration.

Ka'harja was intrigued by the fluff that now spilt out of his mother's ears and fell under its own weight like decorative hair extensions. But when he reached out his hand he found that, instead of following his first instinct to playfully tug on his mother's hair, his palm met her cheek and his thumb wiped away a lone tear that had made its way under her eye.

Her skin barely felt like her own, but he didn't care. No matter what she looked like she was still his mother and nothing—not even turning into a dragon— could ever change that.

Ka'harja slid his hand over his mother's face and rested a finger on her nose. He grinned and pushed against one of her nostrils. 'I bet I could fit an entire finger in one of these bad boys.'

Distro snorted a laugh and batted his hand away from her snout.

'Guess what?' asked Ka'harja as he poked his mother's nose again. He continued when she met his eye with a tired grin. 'You're great.'

Distro's laugh was louder this time. 'No, *you* are!'

'You're greater though,' barely noticing the new deepness to her voice, Ka'harja poked her again. He stopped and looked down at his food as he turned the day over in his mind. 'You saved my life.'

'You're my little boy,' Distro rasped. 'What else was I meant to do? Have that bitch take you back to the Heck'ne? I'd never let that happen to you.'

Ka'harja smiled and drank his soup. It was hard to figure out what he was feeling; the last two days had been pretty hectic. He knew, though, that he was relieved Distro was still alive. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like to lose her. Whenever he tried to think about what he would have done if she'd lost the fight or died in the fire, his mind shut off and all he could imagine was a bird flying into a window. Maybe he was supposed to be the bird? He wasn't sure what his brain was doing.

'I love you, Mum,' he finally managed. 'I love you more than I've ever loved anything else.'

'Even more than that sexy werewolf calendar you got on our holiday to Bonark?'

Ka'harja nearly choked. 'At least twice as much. You didn't see me pulling *that* out of the fire, did you?'

Distro's smile seemed to stick on her now, and even when she looked away it didn't falter. 'How's the soup taste?'

'As salty as Koko's attitude,' Ka'harja laughed. 'I think you'll like it. Give it a go.'

Distro lifted her bowl and blew over the soup; mist flowed into the air and it almost looked like she'd exhaled white smoke.

Ka'harja grinned at his mother as she turned back to him.

'No spoon?' she joked.

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Since when were you the sort of loser to eat soup with a

spoon?’

Distro laughed. She put the bowl to her mouth and tried to drink, but the ceramics clinked against her teeth and hot soup spilt down her front.

Ka’harja’s shirt ripped in his hurry to get it off. He forced it over his head and wiped the steaming soup off his mother before urging her towards the cold river.

‘It doesn’t hurt at all,’ said Distro as she pulled away from her son. ‘It feels... comfortably warm.’

‘But it was steaming!’ Ka’harja exclaimed. ‘You’d have to be a dragon for it to not... burn.... Right. I get it. Stop laughing.’

Still giggling, though covering her mouth to muffle it, Distro shook her head at her son and gave him a shove. ‘Did you not notice?’ she asked with a grin.

‘Look, it’s been a *long* day,’ Ka’harja plopped down next to his mother and sighed. He watched as Distro started to scratch at her new scales again. ‘Itchy?’

‘No,’ mumbled Distro. ‘Just different.’

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Ka’harja grinned. ‘Soon, you’ll forget what it was like to *not* have scales!’

‘Yeah,’ Distro chuckled. Then she frowned and shifted uncomfortably. ‘Can you look at my back for me? I think something’s wrong with it.’

‘I’ll give you a massage if you like,’ Ka’harja told her. ‘But you’re going to have to take your binder off.’

‘I’m pretty sure they’ve disappeared anyway,’ Distro sighed as she turned around. She pulled off her shirt and binder and then groaned. ‘Yep, flatter than ever.’

‘Isn’t that what you wanted?’ Ka’harja asked, feeling awkward. ‘You always complained about them. Shouldn’t losing them be a good thing?’

Distro shrugged. ‘I guess.... But I didn’t want them completely gone. Just smaller.’

‘Damn— DAMN!’

‘What?’ Distro jumped at Ka’harja’s exclamation. ‘What is it?’

‘You nearly got wings!’ Ka’harja told her.

Distro frowned. ‘What do you mean I “*nearly*” got wings?’

Ka’harja grabbed one of the lumps that were protruding from her back and squeezed it. ‘It looks like you had wings, and then they melted half into your back— Great Star it moved! Do that again!’

Distro pulled away from her son and shook her head. ‘Lose them on the front....’

Slowly, Ka’harja reached up again. He put his hand between Distro’s shoulders and laughed when her she tensed instinctively and her half-wings squeezed his hand tightly.

‘You could hold things with these! That’s ridiculous,’ he laughed. ‘Can I have my hand back now?’

‘I don’t know how to let go,’ said Distro. ‘Maybe....’ She took a deep breath and relaxed, and Ka’harja was able to pull his hand away. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Never better,’ Ka’harja grinned. ‘Keep eating and I’ll give you that massage.’

Distro nodded and picked up her soup. It was obviously difficult for her, but she managed to get most of the remaining soup into her mouth as Ka’harja rubbed her shoulders. What didn’t get in her mouth ran down her chin and chest, steaming in the cold night air.

Without thinking Ka'harja passed her his already-damp shirt to wipe herself down. As she did, he gave her a shove. 'So that healer guy's pretty cute.'

'Which guy?' Distro questioned.

'The one with the ponytail and pale skin,' laughed Ka'harja. 'Though he's nowhere near as pale as you. He was hanging around at the back of the group looking nervous?'

'Oh, I saw him,' Distro nodded. 'He was... interesting-looking.'

'I think he was cute!'

Distro shook her head. 'You'd think half a lemon was cute if it looked at you the right way.'

Ka'harja shoved his mother again, and she shoved him back. He pushed her again just as a dim glow caught his eye and he turned and saw Sken coming down the hill towards them. He lifted a hand in greeting, and frowned at Distro when she playfully high-fived him.

Sken smiled warmly as she sat next to Ka'harja and her gills gave a small flare. 'So, ladies, I have a ques—'

'BAKU!' a voice interrupted from the camp; they shouted so loud they cut off Sken. 'BAKU DO YOUR TRICK!'

'I HAVE THE BOTTLES! SOMEONE GET THE CHIKCHIK!'

Sken rolled her eyes as Baku shouted back. 'Foxens at their finest.'

'Yeah, we're a bit like that,' Ka'harja chuckled anxiously. He was tempted to get up and hurry back to camp—he didn't want to miss the trick—but he glanced at his mother, who gave him a severe look, and instead he turned to Sken. 'You had a question?'

'Yes, I hope you don't think I'm being rude, but I...' Sken trailed off. She looked away and twitched her gills. 'I um... don't mean to be insensitive or anything....'

'Go on,' said Distro with a nod.

'What *are* you?' Sken asked. 'You're not foxen?'

Ka'harja frowned. 'Uh, yes she is.'

Sken shook her head. 'Well, I've never seen a foxen like you before.'

'What are you talking about—'

'I think she means the whole *turning into a dragon* thing, Ka'harja,' Distro interrupted her son with a sigh.

'Yeah, that's it,' Sken agreed. She pointed back towards the caravan. 'None of the others have ever done that before, even in our worst fights. I asked them what happened to you but they just kept going on about some "maiden" and started drinking themselves blind.'

'Maiden?' Ka'harja asked. He continued when Sken nodded, 'Have you never heard of Klict before? Maiden Klict? From the story of Gagoo'galornga?'

Sken's eyes widened and her fins flicked back. 'What in the name of the three moons is a *Gagoo'galornga*?'

Ka'harja scoffed and turned away. 'I can't believe this,' he mumbled.

'Get over it, Sweetheart,' Distro laughed. 'I don't think many other cultures talk about him.'

'I know secas don't talk about him,' said Sken. 'That was supposed to be a *name*?'

'Gagoo'galornga and Maiden Kliet are from an old story about a nurlak who killed a wolveren shape-shifter,' Distro explained. 'It's supposedly about how foxen people started existing.'

'*Supposedly?*' Sken glanced between Ka'harja and Distro. 'You don't think it's the truth?'

Distro opened her mouth to respond but no words came out. Her dark eyes looked lost for a second before she closed them and shook her head. 'After today I'm not sure I'm brave enough to call it a lie.'

'You're braver than I am,' Ka'harja shivered. He didn't think anyone would be able to deny *that*.

Distro put a hand on her son's shoulder. 'Ka'harja, you're freezing. Go sit by the fire.'

'Only if you come too,' said Ka'harja.

'Alright, fine,' Distro sighed before she pushed herself to her feet and pet Ka'harja on the shoulder. 'Let's go get you warm.'

Ka'harja rose to follow her and they climbed the hill back to the caravan together. Sken followed behind them, her glowing freckles giving just enough light for the trio to make their way safely uphill. As they reached the top the caravan went silent. Distro took a step back and Ka'harja felt her take his hand.

He wanted to comfort her, but before he had the chance there was an explosion of excited shouting from the caravaners.

'Come sit with us!' Baku exclaimed, running up and grabbing Distro's free hand. He pulled her to the fire and sat her down as the rest of the travellers crowded her.

Ka'harja trailed behind Distro, dragged along by his mother's firm grip. He wasn't sure if she was going to let go... or if he'd ever get the feeling back in his fingers if she did.

As she sat down the guards gave a cheer; they raised their bottles and shouted with joy and stumbled around like idiots.

Distro gave a sheepish bow and looked away. 'You don't have to do that.'

'But we *want* to!' Baku laughed, his cheeks growing even darker than his drunken flush had already made them. 'You deserve it!'

'It would be an honour if you'd eat with us,' Coborn swallowed as she held out another bowl of soup for Distro; unaware that she'd already eaten. 'N-Not because you've called Kliet. That's amazing too but— But the way you fought today.... You're so brave. It's an honour to meet someone you.'

'Thank you,' said Distro. She took the bowl and Ka'harja screamed internally as he remembered he'd forgotten their other bowls by the river. 'I don't feel brave, though. I was just protecting my son. I can't imagine doing anything less for him.'

Ka'harja smiled, pushing his thoughts about the bowls to the back of his mind, and kissed his mother on the cheek.

'What's it like?' Koko asked, smiling widely. Her ears pricked up and her tail gave a small wag when Distro turned to her. 'Did it hurt? Could you hear or see better? Do your scales have feeling in them or are they numb? Do you—'

'I'm not sure about anything yet,' Distro put a hand up to silence Koko. 'It will take me a while, I think, before I can answer anything like that. But changing... it didn't hurt

at all. It was like a rush of adrenaline as time slowed down for me. Then I was suddenly different. I could fit Kay'oten's whole head in my mouth and... I felt the urge to just bite down and...'

'Shake the shit out of her?' Lif snickered. 'Because that's what you did.'

Distro gave a weak smile and nodded.

'Uh, Distro?' Trat gave a cough, and after a nervous pause he continued, 'I'm not an expert or anything... but aren't you supposed to turn back?'

The excited chatter turned to silence as the caravaners nodded and looked around each other.

Distro shrugged. 'I don't know, I guess not.'

There was an awkward quiet as everyone considered Trat's question.

Ka'harja bit his lip. It was true; the stories about dragon-shifting... the women always turned back into themselves afterwards. What made Distro so different? She was foxen, wasn't she—

'You're part wolveren!' Ka'harja exclaimed, gripping his mother by the shoulders and shaking her. 'That's why you're only half dragon! Because you're only half foxen! The wolveren parts got confused!'

Sken frowned. 'That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!'

'I don't know about that,' Baku argued. 'I mean, it's not like anyone has any better idea of what's happened to her. I vote it's the wolveren blood in her that's done it.'

Lif raised his hand. 'Seconded!'

'You're all nuts,' Felelor grumbled. 'The Maiden was wolveren; don't you think that her blood would know what to do?'

'Not to sound, uh... ig-ignorant or an-anything,' piped up a voice. Ka'harja looked and saw the caravan's healer fiddling with his long, blonde hair. 'B-But I— I-I'm not— Entirely sure wh-what's going o-on. Who's the M-Maiden?'

'Coff, I'm going to kill you, and then I'm going to kill myself,' groaned Koko as she tugged on his ponytail. 'I knew you grew up in La'Can, but I didn't realise you'd also lived in a cave.'

'Can we please not do this?' Distro groaned. 'Klic isn't even real.'

The caravaners let out gasps of shock and Ka'harja put an arm around his mother as she buried her face in her hands. He hated seeing her so stressed but he had no idea what to do to make it better.

'You don't believe in the Maiden?' Baku asked gently.

'*I don't know,*' Distro whispered. 'I don't know *anything* anymore.'

Trat scoffed. 'How can you *not* believe in her after you—' he was cut off as Felelor punched his shoulder so hard he stumbled.

Ka'harja was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of Felelor's fist.

'So, you're half wolveren?' Coborn sat beside Distro and reached to touch her on the shoulder, though she pulled back at the last second and swallowed. 'I thought there was something about your name that didn't sound right. Distro's a wolveren name isn't it? From Bonark?'

'Konde, actually,' Distro grinned. 'But I'm from La'Can. I've changed my name like, thirty-billion times!'

Everyone stared as Distro laughed— Though it sounded more like a sob to Ka'harja. 'What was your birth name?' asked Coborn.

'Koktansi,' Distro blushed.

'Gighi, that's a really bad name for you,' Stars blurted from her place by the caravans. 'It doesn't suit you at all. Na. No wonder you changed it!'

'I also went by Tankiti for a year or two,' Distro admitted. 'Yes, it's a man's name, I know. I was experimenting.'

Koko let out a laugh. 'That's my dad's name!'

Snickers filled the air as the caravaners made jokes, but the mood dropped as Distro began to examine her scale-covered hands.

'Maybe if I wasn't half wolveren I wouldn't be so messed up—'

'Don't say that!' Stars interrupted. 'You're *not* messed up! Don't maka like a liar!'

Ka'harja watched as Stars pushed past the caravaners and stood over Distro; Annanyn followed closely at her side, carrying Little Demon.

'Stars I don't think she means—'

'You're *not* messed up! You're the bravest kiita in the whole world!' Stars continued, oblivious to everyone's objections. 'And you're smart and kind, as well as kama! Just because you look different doesn't mean you're messed up or na kama; especially not when it was you doing something so taa'han that made you be what you are!'

Dena grabbed her daughter's hands and made to move her away from Distro. She tried to comfort her daughter in Har'py, but obviously failed as Stars pulled away again and frowned.

'She doesn't understand how mip she is, Kekik!' Stars said. 'You're good. You're *really* good, Distro. The mip kiita.'

Distro stared at Stars for a long moment before looking back down to her hands. 'The best warrior, huh?'

She looked even more tired than before, Ka'harja thought. He put an arm around his mother. He wasn't sure what to say. But he knew he had to say *something* after Stars. He swallowed, 'Stars is right. And even if she wasn't, I'd still love you.'

For a second, Distro smiled. Then she sighed and dropped her hands to her side.

'You're good, Kekik Distro,' said Stars. 'You're not messed up and bad and broken. You're brave and strong and smart.'

Distro raised a hand to silence Stars. 'You don't understand. I am messed up,' she said. 'I'm the halfway point between two types of *not* messed up, and nothing can change that now.'

'You don't understand,' Stars frowned. 'You think you're messed up because you're half one thing, half another?'

Distro looked up, shocked at the aggression in Stars' voice, and nodded.

'My baby's not messed up, and he's tia'fio, too. Half one thing, half another...' Stars' tone lost its edge as she looked to the sky and trailed off, distracted by a shooting star.

The entire caravan stopped to watch the star fall. When it faded away into the distance they all seemed to let out a collective breath of relief; they didn't say it, but Ka'harja knew they'd been worried the falling star would land like the night before.

Even after the star was gone they still stood in silence, glancing anxiously between themselves.

Stars was the first to speak, 'Klict was part dragon just like you are now, remember?'

Distro nodded. 'Well, yes, she was but—'

'And all foxen people come from parts of Klict, right?'

'Yes—'

'So really, you've *always* been part dragon,' Stars said simply. 'And so you haven't changed on the inside. Just the outside. And the outside doesn't matter. If the outside mattered, we'd all look exactly the same, and there'd be no kama or niritaka or tia'fio or harpy or foxen or nurlak. We would all just be bal'hiki.'

The caravaners looked as confused as Ka'harja felt. But Distro seemed to understand what the girl was trying to say as she gave her a nod and took a deep breath, sitting up straight and picking up the bowl Coborn had given her before.

'We would all just be *bal'hiki*,' she echoed. Then a smile turned up the corners of her lips, and she looked up at the girl. 'Well... I'm glad we're not all the same. You're right. We'd be boring if we were.'

Everyone watched in silence as she clanked the ceramics against her teeth and spilt soup over herself. After she was done there was an agonising quiet that wasn't interrupted until Distro burped.

'*You*, give me your drink,' she grumbled, pushing herself to her feet.

Baku passed her the almost-full bottle and she gulped it down. Then she threw the bottle in a random direction and then turned around.

'I'm going for a walk,' she said. 'I'll see you all in a few hours. Ka'harja! Sit your arse back down! You're *not* coming with me!'

Ka'harja—who was halfway off his seat—plopped back down and sighed. 'Be safe.'

Distro didn't acknowledge him as she wandered away.

Ka'harja almost laughed; anyone else would have disappeared into the darkness by now, but her too-pale skin practically glowed in the moonlight and the caravaners watched as she began walking in circles around the field.

The group shifted awkwardly, obviously lost at what to say.

'Okay, no, but really,' Sken broke the tension. 'What's this story about Klict? I'm as lost as an incarrah in a tsunami.'

'Maiden Klict is the ancestor to all foxen people,' Koko explained. 'There's an old song that goes along with it. I can't remember the lyrics but it was good.'

'And who is Gagoo'galenga?'

'Galornga,' Koko corrected. 'He was a nurlak who wanted to be the king of the Heck'ne. He thought if he killed a dragon he'd end up higher rank than the Prophet.'

'Mala'kala Har'kark,' Stars chimed in. 'He banished Gagoo'galornga, but Gagoo'galornga came back with dragon scales and took over all of Heck'ne with the magic they gave him!'

'I thought this was a foxen story?' Sken gave an impish grin. 'Why do *you* know so much?'

'Gagoo'galornga is why nurlak can't be troop leaders,' Stars blinked. 'Because



Gagoo'galornnga was tarnarp and shamed us, and made everything bad for us. Did you know the mup ranking foxen is still mip than the mip ranking nurlak in the Heck'ne? Is that the same here? It doesn't seem like it's the same here. Are we equals?' she looked to Ka'harja. 'We're friends, right? That means we're the same rank? You're not more mip than me, and I'm not more mup than you?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Everyone's the same rank here.'

'Except for me,' Sken laughed, sitting next to Ka'harja and putting her arm around him. 'I'm the boss. You all have to listen to me.... I'm uh, what did you call it? "Mip"?''

Koko gave her a slap around the head, which only made her laugh more.

'Alright, I get it,' Sken threw up her hands. 'I'm not appreciated for my hard work.'

'I appreciate you,' Stars looked hurt. 'Please don't think I don't.'

'I was joking,' said Sken. She flicked the barb on her tail at Koko. 'So Galornnga killed a dragon? How did that make foxen people exist?'

Lif and Trat stepped forward and offered their boss the answer:

'The dragon was actually a shape-shifter,' Trat explained. 'Maiden Klict— The lost Canis heir. There's a lot to it, but the story is basically that she was in her wolvern form when Galornnga first found her, and he kept her captive until she went crazy and thought he was in love with her.'

Annanyn shook her head. 'The poor thing.'

'Yeah,' Baku agreed. 'She had the chance to run away, too, but she was so far-gone because of Galornnga's abuse that she was too scared to leave him. In the end, she was nothing but pieces of shredded corpse in the swamplands.'

'Galornnga found out she was a dragon,' Koko explained. 'She shifted for him after a few years of being his prisoner; thinking that if she told Galornnga what she was he'd marry her and stop abusing her. Instead he killed her halfway through her shifting back, and then ripped her scales off and left the rest of her to rot in the swamp.'

Lif nodded. 'The pieces still had shape-shifting magic in them when she died, and they ended up turning into a bunch of men.'

'M-Men?' Coff's voice came from behind Ka'harja, and Ka'harja nearly shouted with fright. 'Why d-did they turn i-into *m-men*?''

Ka'harja swallowed. 'That's just how the story goes.'

'The foxen men started a war with the Heck'ne,' Koko continued. 'And they took back Klict's scales. They ripped them apart and they turned into a bunch of women.'

'And that's why foxen women turn into dragons when they're angry,' Stars finished.

There was a moment of silence before Felelor gave a bark-like laugh.

'That was the worst explanation of the story I've ever heard!' he sniffed and flicked his ears. 'Sit down, shut up, and let Naranako tell it properly.'

## **Chapter End.**

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